

Foundation goes 'above and beyond' to assist Wagner family of Frederick

By Jeremy Johnson

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FREDERICK — Kimberly Wagner said her family has had a hard time traveling together at all since her and her husband Kevin's 8-year-old son, Cooper, was diagnosed with autism some five years ago.



The Wagners of Frederick pose for a picture during a recent trip to Davenport, Fla., courtesy of the Sunshine Foundation. The foundation helps families with special needs children by providing special moments or vacations the family might otherwise never be able to achieve. Mother Kimberly Wagner (right) said her 8-year-old autistic son Cooper (center, with backpack) opened up more than usual and responded well to the trip - particularly Legoland - making it a lot of fun for the whole family.

Wagner said she appreciates all the resources available near the family's Tri-Town home in Frederick – she said there were little available to them when the family was living in Asheville, N.C., at the time of Cooper's diagnosis. But she said traveling has always been an unbearable burden for the family of six, especially since Cooper has adverse reactions to even being in a vehicle.

However, the Wagner family, with the help of the Loveland Chapter of national nonprofit organization, the Sunshine Foundation, was recently able to jet set across the country to the foundation's Dream Village in Davenport, Fla. When the family wasn't busy enjoying the Dream Village's amenities – the 22-acre resort is specifically equipped to meet the special needs of children like Cooper and even includes a private citrus grove where families can pick their own oranges – they were touring a slew of theme parks including Legoland, SeaWorld and, of course, the Walt Disney World Resort.

The Sunshine Foundation provided the Wagners with full, round-trip airfare, room and board, tickets to theme parks and a rental car for their five-day stay at Dream Village. Wagner said, as part of a lucky coincidence, the family also got to spend a couple of days with their family, many of whom live in Florida.

Wagner said the whole family was very grateful for the gift.

"Emotionally or financially, there's no way we could have afforded to take six people on a trip like this," she said just days after their Aug. 15 return to Colorado.

Much like others with autism, Wagner said Cooper is typically "nonverbal" and struggles with crowded or noisy places. She said he is still not potty trained and can be sometimes physically aggressive in light of change or surprise.

"We have to kind of be his ears and eyes to understand what he needs at different points in the day, kind of like with an infant or a toddler," Wagner said. "He doesn't talk much."

But that all changed when Cooper started on his first airplane ride, and later when the family reached their destination, she said.

"He was much more verbal ... and was just spouting words," Wagner said. "He absolutely loved Legoland, especially the water play area. We didn't think he'd last an hour but he just loved it."

Wagner praised the foundation and noted the little touches that made the trip all the more special, like snacks awaiting them when they got to their rooms and stuffed animals on the beds of each of the Wagner's four children.

"They just go above and beyond," Wagner said, choking back tears and adding that the experience has inspired her to start her own chapter of the Sunshine Foundation in Frederick. "I can't thank the Sunshine Foundation enough for what they did and that's the reason I want to help — for the other families. This is just an amazing experience, especially for those who can't do it on their own."

Similarly, the nearly 40-year-old Sunshine Foundation provides for many families who, because of special needs of family members, often cannot afford or manage a "dream vacation" of their own.

To date, the foundation has helped provide "dream vacations" or other special events for more than 37,000 U.S. children and their families.

For more information on the Sunshine Organization or to donate, go to www.sunshinefoundation.org.

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